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The National Magazine of the Successful Hispanic American

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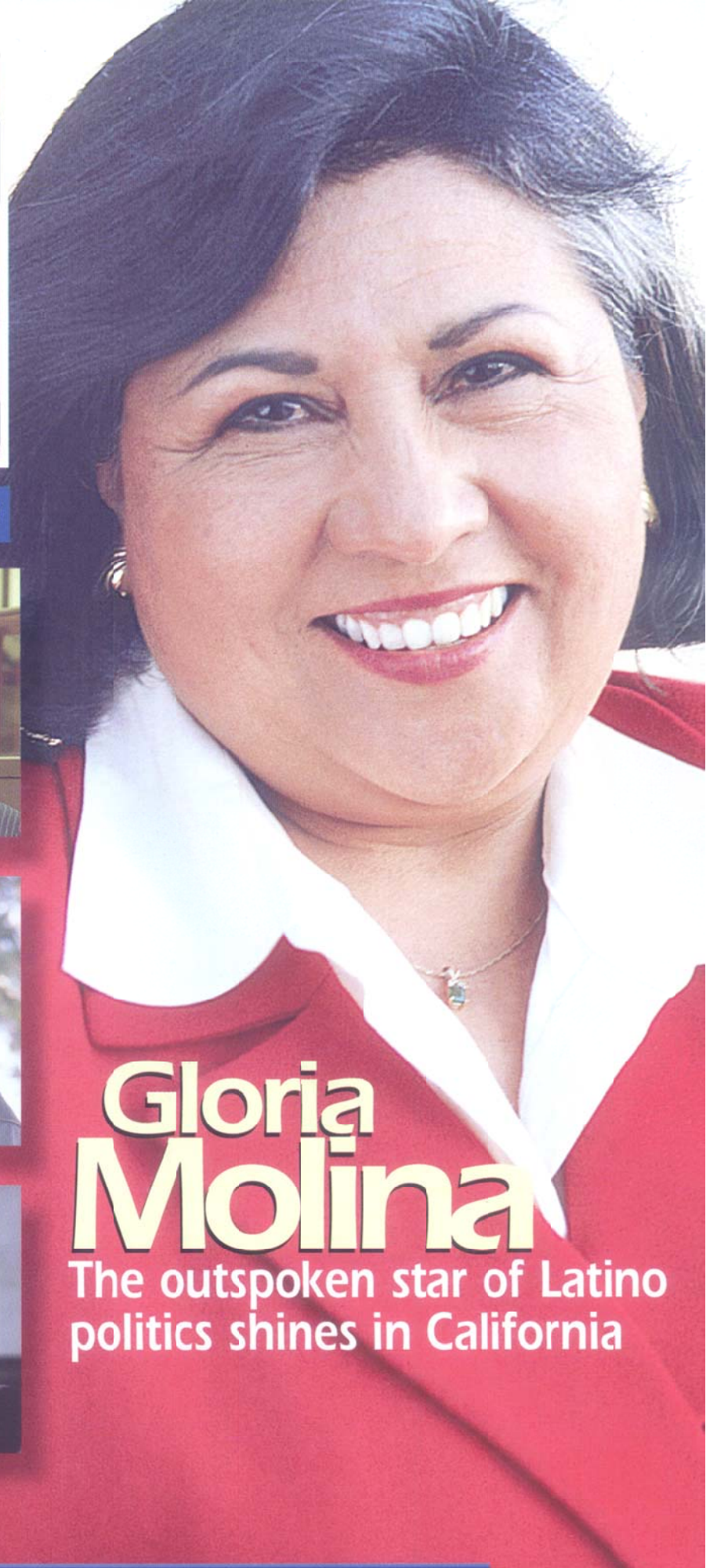

Gloria Molina

The outspoken star of Latino politics shines in California

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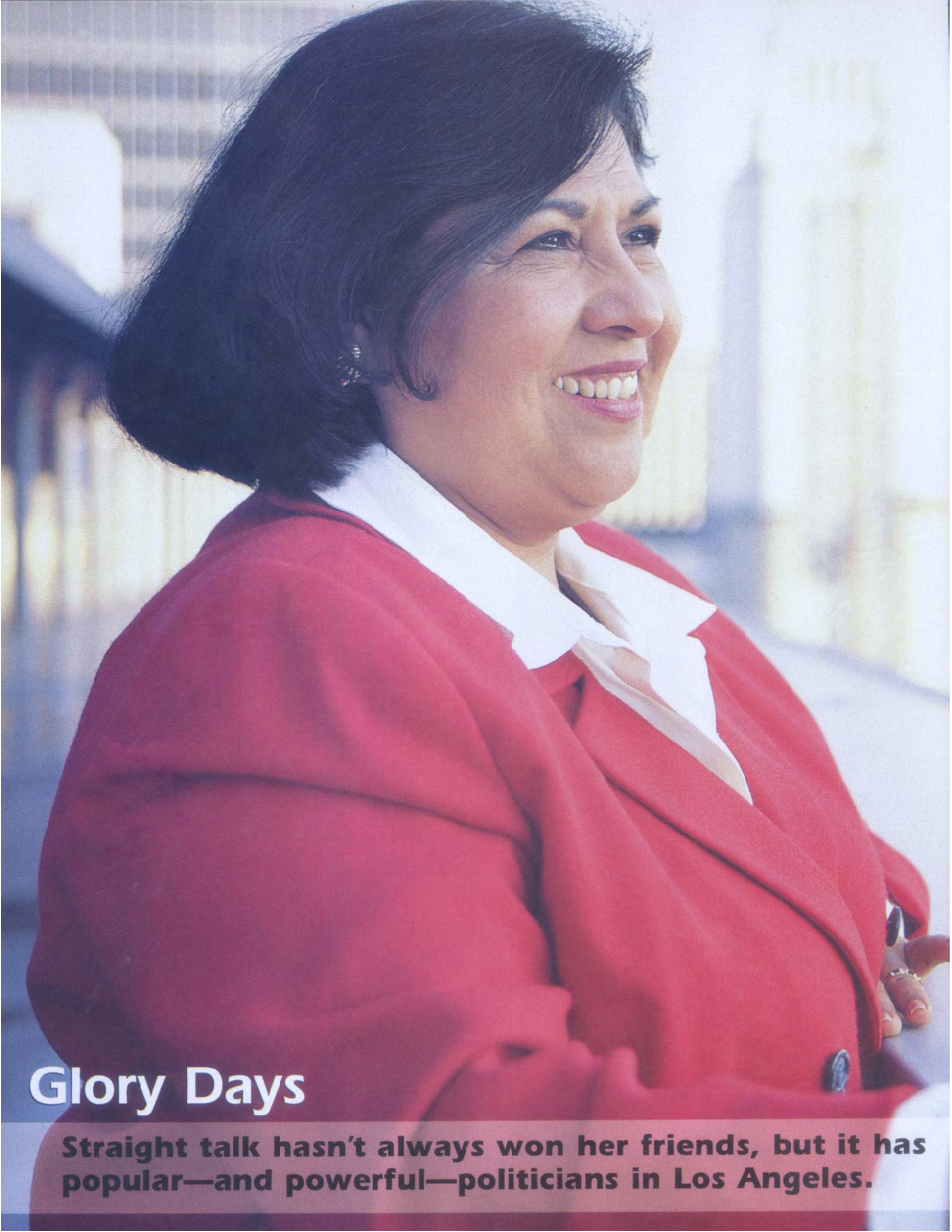


Glory Days

Straight talk hasn't always won her friends, but it has popular—and powerful—politicians in Los Angeles.

Gloria MOLINA

By Rick Laezman

SUPERVISOR
Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors
Los Angeles, California

made her one of the most

MAIN cover
Gloria Molina

"I'm still not good at being the front person. I'm too opinionated. Frankly, I'm surprised I'm here."

As if the responsibilities of her title were not enough, Gloria Molina has made her job as Los Angeles County Supervisor even more difficult by the unconventional way she approaches it.

"I am an activist politician," she declares sitting at her desk in her downtown Los Angeles office. The window behind her offers an impressive view of the city skyline, a reminder of the immense metropolis she serves.

Los Angeles County is home to over ten million people. It includes the city of Los Angeles and eighty-seven other municipalities. The most populous county in the nation, it is exceeded in size by only eight states. Each of the five supervisors represents approximately two million people.

The size of the constituency combined with the absence of the term limits that most elected California officials are subject to makes the county board one of the most powerful local governments in the country. Some say it is the most powerful in California. As a testament to that power, many elected officials that, like Molina, served in the powerful state legislature, have stepped down to run for the board.

Molina shows no signs of being overwhelmed by the size of her district. Nor does she seem overly impressed by the influential post she holds. In fact, she is as all-business as a politician can get. "What I do every day is significant," she says. "Wherever I've been, people have always asked me what I'm going to do next, and I always say, 'I'm just going to do this job.'"

Molina uses "empower" more than any other word to describe her objectives: "I want to empower my community," "I believe in empowerment," "Empowerment is slipping away." Empowerment is the goal of her activism, an interpretation of her political role born out of her unique ascension in the political hierarchy, and one that has brought her no small amount of criticism.

Getting into action

Thirty years ago, Molina did not see herself as a future legislator. Her first political involvement came as a teenager in an effort to improve educational opportunities for young Latinas in the local public schools. She was shocked at the illiteracy rate among her peers and equally dismayed by local school officials' lack of interest in the problem. "The teachers didn't care," she decries. More importantly, "the policy makers were all white men."

The experience had a profound impact on her, and she began to get more involved. She worked as a gofer on Robert F. Kennedy's 1968 presidential campaign, an assignment that grew out of her own "passive activism."

"I had a civic interest in politics, but I was a follower, not a leader," she says. She joined the cause of the United Farm Workers and "boycotted grapes at supermarkets with Cesar Chavez." She also participated in the anti-war movement. "We knew about all the Latinos being killed in Vietnam," she explains. She points out, however, that protestors and politicians were on opposite sides, and there was little empathy between them: "As a protester, you are always anti-politician."

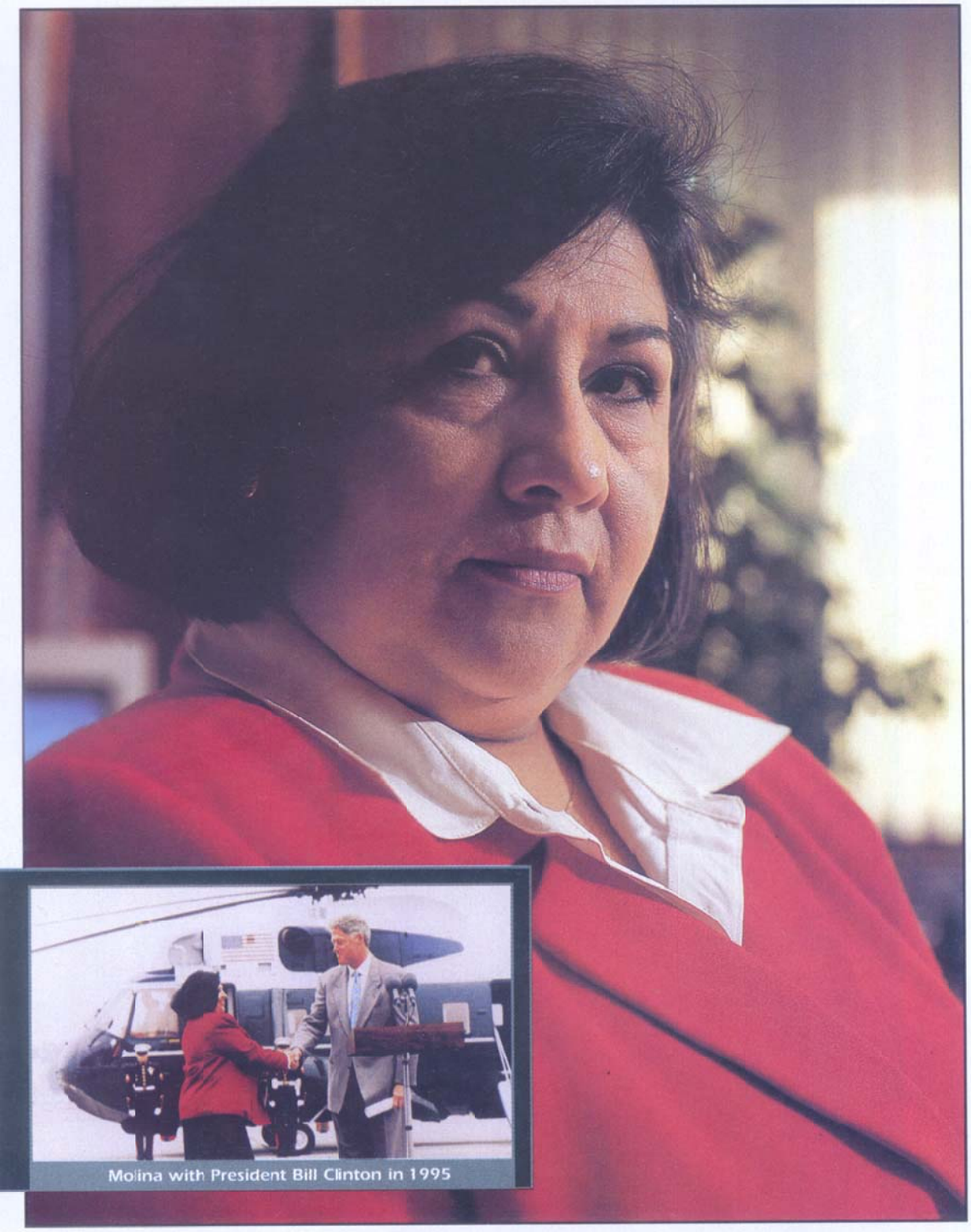
Molina eventually decided that protest marches and demonstrations were not the best way to effect change. She discovered, she says, that "you gotta learn to play the game if you want to change it." At that point, she committed herself more constructively.

In 1973 Molina and others founded a Hispanic women's organization, Comision Femenil, and she became its first president. She and other

Los Angeles County is a local government jurisdiction that provides services on behalf of the state of California. It encompasses a large territory that includes all of the city of Los Angeles as well as eighty-seven other cities. The services it provides include law enforcement, tax collection, public health protection, welfare, parks and recreation, and others. As the governing body of the county, the elected board of supervisors manages nearly 100,000 employees and a budget of $15.6 billion.

Latinas had been active supporters of the Hispanic civil rights movement but had remained "on the second level because we were women." They formed their own group to confront the reality that "we had to fight twice as hard just to be equal."

The inequalities hit home in 1980 when two Southern California congressional district vacancies opened in one election, prime opportunities for Hispanic candidates. Molina and several other women approached the local, all-male leadership and suggested that one Latino and one Latina run, but the men "laughed in our faces," she remembers. "We were very unrealistic to think that they would share power with us. Power is something that just isn't shared like that."



Molina with President Bill Clinton in 1995

The women remain undaunted. "We needed to see Chicanas in positions of political power—a Latina in the United States Congress. There had never been one before." The passion fueling her activism seems palpable as she describes her involvement twenty years later. Obviously, she still carries the torch. "We have to sit at the table," she insists.

Strong philosophical beliefs can sometimes be difficult to reconcile with personal experiences, a struggle that Molina knows firsthand. "I was very conflicted over the anti-macho sentiment of the women's movement," she confesses. The discord arose from her strong relationship with her father, Leonardo Molina, who she describes as a "good macho man."

Leonardo was born in the United States, then sent back to Mexico to live with an aunt and uncle after his parents died when he was three. As an adult he returned to the US

Gloria Molina
Supervisor
1st District
County of Los Angeles

856 Kenneth Hahn Hall of Admin
500 W Temple St
Los Angeles CA 90012
(213) 974-4111
molina@bos.co.la.ca.us
molina.co.la.ca.us

from Casas Grandes in the Mexican state of Chihuahua as a laborer in the bracero program. While he worked, his wife, Concepción, stayed home to take care of Gloria and the other nine children.

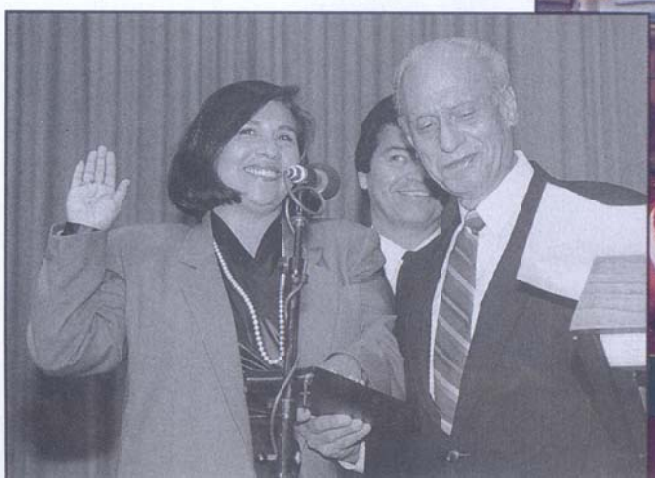
Molina traces her commitment to Hispanic causes, in part, to an incident involving her father when she was six. She and her siblings were strolling to the car after church one Sunday when he told them to stop. He walked over to the car and had a long conversation with a police officer before waving the family to come over.

Always inquisitive, Gloria asked her mother what had happened. Her mother explained that he did not want the police officer to give him a ticket. Molina realizes now that her father was trying not only to appease the officer but also to spare the family the humiliation of seeing the officer dress him down or even haul him off to jail. Molina says that from then on she knew that "police were different and we were different."

The incident burned into her memory because she was "troubled by my strong father's subservience to the police." Furthermore, it gave me "a gut instinct that told me people weren't treating us right," a feeling that fueled her activism.

There were other important experiences in her youth. Molina grew up in Pico Rivera, a small, working-class community in the San Gabriel Valley east of Los Angeles. The oldest of ten siblings, she learned early about the pressures of setting an example. "I was no stranger to awesome responsibility," she emphasizes.

Despite those burdens, she has only fond recollections of childhood. "I was a child for a long time," she reminisces, recalling a "Chicano, Mexican-American upbringing" in a "traditional Catholic family," which meant "church and park on Sundays." She also has great memories of spending her summers with her extended family in Casas Grandes.

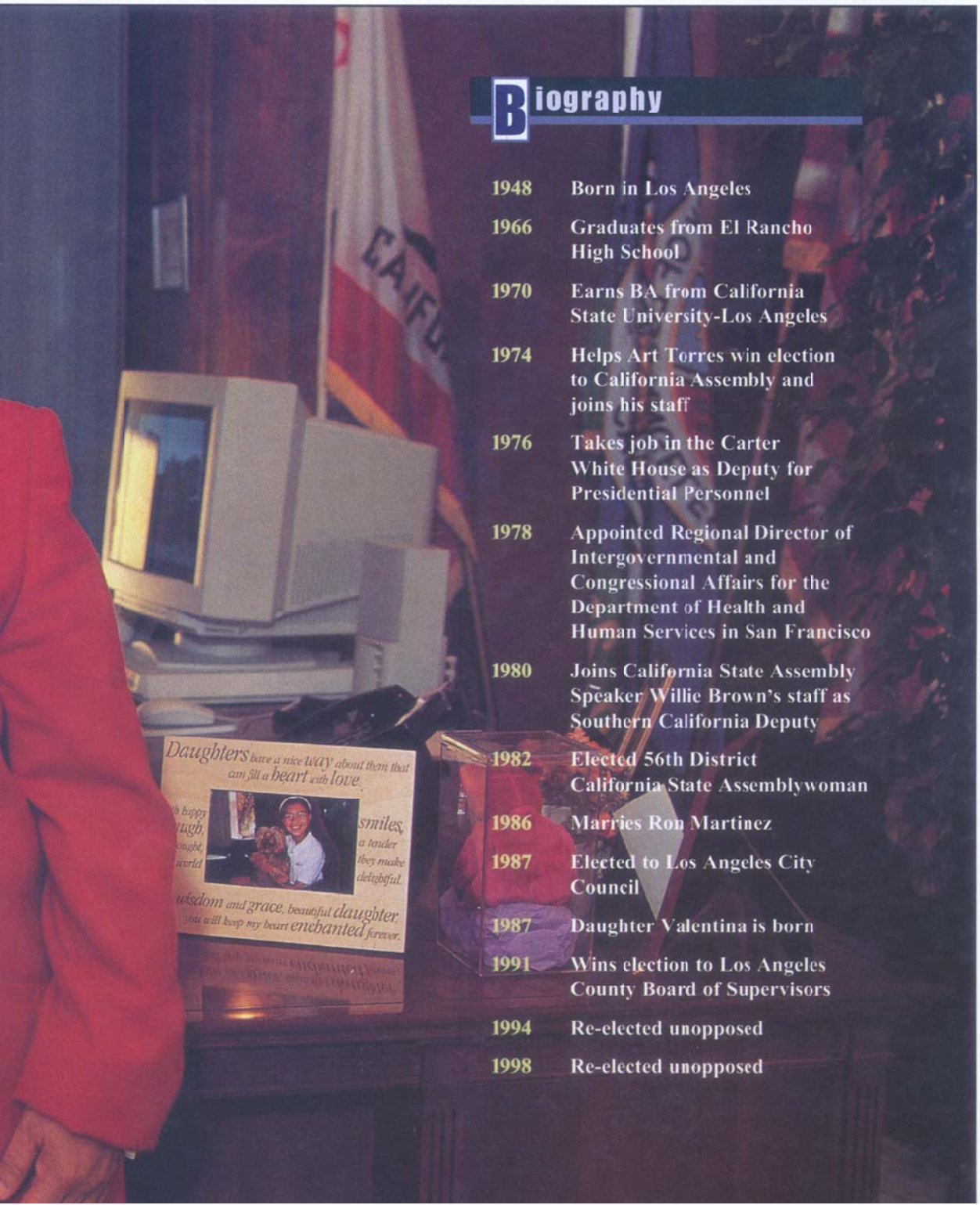


Congressman Edward Roybal swears Molina in as LA Supervisor in 1991
(her husband Ron Martinez is in rear)

"I had a wonderful childhood," she says.

Although the family was not well off, they did not suffer. Nor did they consider themselves poor. "We were just like everybody else," she laughs. According to Molina, they did not know the difference until they got a television and discovered they had "just a little bit less than everybody else. Then we asked, 'You mean kids have their own bedrooms?'"

While today's youth might find existence without a television unimaginable, for Molina it was never a handicap. Her parents emphasized education (even though they had little schooling themselves), and she "read the neighbor's discarded magazines." Seeing the world through slick periodicals spurred her first career choice of "becoming a fashion designer."



Biography

1948	Born in Los Angeles
1966	Graduates from El Rancho High School
1970	Earns BA from California State University-Los Angeles
1974	Helps Art Torres win election to California Assembly and joins his staff
1976	Takes job in the Carter White House as Deputy for Presidential Personnel
1978	Appointed Regional Director of Intergovernmental and Congressional Affairs for the Department of Health and Human Services in San Francisco
1980	Joins California State Assembly Speaker Willie Brown's staff as Southern California Deputy
1982	Elected 56th District California State Assemblywoman
1986	Marries Ron Martinez
1987	Elected to Los Angeles City Council
1987	Daughter Valentina is born
1991	Wins election to Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors
1994	Re-elected unopposed
1998	Re-elected unopposed

Dreams of design

Although Molina did not learn English until the third grade, she did well enough to finish high school, a monumental accomplishment for a member of her family. She enrolled in college to pursue her dream, despite mild protests from her mother, who believed fashion design an unrealistic goal.

Molina "resisted the limitation" and went to college anyway. However, when her father suffered an on-the-job accident, she had to leave school early to support the family. She became a secretary in a legal aid office, where her bilingual skills served her well and she discovered a "fascination with lawyers." She attended college at night while continuing the activist causes she had joined as a student. She also began

working for Hispanics seeking public office.

In 1972 Molina volunteered on the campaign that elected Richard Alatorre to the California State Assembly. Alatorre was an outspoken candidate from East Los Angeles who would later become one of her biggest adversaries. Two years later, she helped Art Torres, a rising young Latino star, get elected to the state Assembly, and subsequently worked on his legislative staff.

Later in the decade, Molina worked for Jimmy Carter's administration in Washington. After Carter left office, she returned to California to work for the powerful California State Assembly Speaker, Willie Brown. Then, in 1982, Torres vacated his 56th Assembly District for a seat in the State Senate. The

"You gotta learn to play the game if you want to change it."

opening presented her a legitimate opportunity to enter the ranks of elected office.

Molina was "picked" to run for the vacant seat, but she was reluctant. She had never thought about running for office before and did not envision herself as a candidate. Until then, she had always thought of herself as "a behind-the-scenes person." Furthermore, she thought she lacked the disposition required of an elected official. "As you may have noticed, I am very opinionated," she says wryly. "I never liked the give and take of politics."

Her trepidation soon gave way to pride. When her political backers told her who they wanted to run if she chose not to, she was shocked. "I pleaded with them not to do that, but they said, 'Well, if you aren't going to run, this is who we will support.'" Although she declines to identify the person, the prospects were objectionable enough to pull her in. She entered the race, and soon discovered that persuading voters would be the least of her worries.

The most formidable challenge came from the male-dominated, Latino political establishment, which included Assemblyman Alatorre and her old boss, Torres. They discouraged her from running on the grounds that the voters were not ready for a woman. Even the venerable Cesar Chavez opposed her candidacy because he had feuded with one of her allies. Eventually he and Molina reconciled and, in time, Torres broke ranks with the establishment and supported her, but she considers the experience "one of the biggest heartbreaks I have had." She firmly believed she had earned the right to "play ball with them."

At the same time, Molina turned her shock into determination. "I wasn't going to let them deny me the opportunity," she recalls. Her gutsiness paid off. Voters, including a strong showing from women, were drawn to her tenacity and the "outsider" image of her campaign. Nineteen years later she still cultivates that image, describing fellow politicians as "people who don't serve the community, who don't resolve problems—and meanwhile, people are suffering."

During the campaign, Molina tapped into the vast network of connections established through years of activism and mounted an impressive grassroots campaign. Her surprising victory made her an instant

national celebrity. How did she feel while all of this was happening? "I was shaking in my boots," she confesses.

Molina represented the 56th Assembly District for five years. Then, in 1987, she ran for and won a seat on the Los Angeles City Council, where she represented the first council district. She held that position until February 1991, when she won her current seat on the county board of supervisors.

Along the way Molina established several firsts. She was the first Latina to hold each of the three posts to which she was elected, and she was the first Hispanic to sit on the LA County Board of Supervisors in over a century. She is also an effective legislator who has left her mark on every office she has served in. Her legacy unquestionably skews left, but more importantly, her legislative projects have always reflected the unique concerns of the people in her district, many of whom are poor, working class, immigrants, and Spanish-speaking.

While in the Assembly, Molina wrote legislation outlawing discrimination against immigrants in the issuance of automobile insurance, as well as a bill requiring notification of residents when their neighborhoods are to be sprayed for agricultural pests. Molina was a champion in Sacramento for consumer protection, affordable education, and children's safety. She also threw her weight behind an effort that registered over 40,000 voters in heavily Latino East Los Angeles, and she spoke out against the location of a new state prison in the community of Lincoln Heights.

Molina's stance on the prison issue was a key in her election to the city council, and she continued to fight the proposal after the election. While at city hall she also continued her battles against toxic pollution and for childcare programs, and she spearheaded efforts to rid her district of drugs and prostitution. Additionally, she adopted the causes of affordable housing and historic preservation.

Wasting not

Despite strong liberal leanings, on the board of supervisors Molina has taken on the traditionally conservative issue of government waste, becoming a self-described "watchdog for taxpayer dollars" on a crusade to eliminate unnecessary perks and bonuses for her elected colleagues and the bureaucrats they supervise.

As a freshman on the board, Molina saw no need to earn her stripes before jumping into this sensitive issue. In her first year, she blew the whistle on an expensive pension spiking scandal, in which county bureaucrats inflated their salaries at the end of their careers to artificially increase their retirement incomes. By stopping this practice, Molina says she and her colleagues saved county taxpayers a projected $100 million.

She also became a staunch opponent of the beleaguered Metropolitan Transportation Agency (which has been accused of corruption and mismanagement) and its planned subway extensions. Molina, who originally supported an extension into her district, eventually opposed the entire project. "We have flushed so many dollars down the drain; it is just unbelievable what we've done here," she said of the extensions. "I'm kind of embarrassed about it all."

Molina has also acted on her pledge to make government more accessible by allowing people to testify at board meetings in Spanish, a practice never allowed before, even though the county has one of the largest Spanish-speaking populations in the country.

Molina is proud of her political accomplishments and unashamed of the feathers she has ruffled along the way. She seems equally adept at stepping on the toes of her colleagues on the elected board and in the bureaucracy that falls under her management. The press kits she distributes at interviews contain newspaper clippings replete with quotes from adversaries criticizing her combative style. She has been called an anarchist, a bitch, and in the words of one diplomatic adversary as "not one to finesse."

Sharing my intimacy

"My parents didn't get much schooling in Mexico. My father only went to the sixth grade and my mother stopped at the third grade, but they always emphasized education. My parents never told me there was anything I couldn't do."

"No one can tell us

[that Latinas] can't do it anymore. No one can tell a woman she can't run for office. We have patted down the grass for a lot of people."

Richard Alatorre, later a colleague of Molina's on the city council, said of her, "She is very smart, but she doesn't know how to work people to get what she wants. She's part of it now. She's not fighting from the outside."

Molina blames some of the resistance she has encountered on sexism, whether from Latino males or males in general. She says she "ran into it all the time in Sacramento," and continues to battle it today. True to character, she has never let herself be intimidated. She defeated a male candidate backed by the Hispanic power elite in every one of her attempts to seek a new office. In her first Assembly election, she defeated Richard Polanco, one of Alatorre's assembly aides. When running for the city council in 1987, she defeated local school board member Larry Gonzales, who was supported by her former boss, Torres. In 1991 she beat Torres himself for a seat on the county board of supervisors.

Molina acknowledges some responsibility for the opposition she has experienced. "I always thought myself limited politically because of my personality," she says. "I'm still not good at being the front person. I'm too opinionated. Frankly, I'm surprised I'm here."

On the other hand, she makes no excuses. "I can't change my inherent traits. I'm straightforward, direct, and, if need be, confrontational." But the most important judges are the people who have kept her in office for nearly twenty years, and she states with no small degree of satisfaction that, in the final analysis, her abrasiveness has brought her "a great following from my constituents."

Her career has also inspired admiration far beyond the district she represents. In the early 1990s a survey by the Spanish-language newspaper *La Opinion* found that she was the nation's most admired Hispanic leader. One official described her as "the next Henry Cisneros," referring to the talented Latino who catapulted to national prominence after serving as mayor of San Antonio. When the White House Project and *Parade* magazine polled readers to ask which women might "have what it takes to be Vice President," a panel of scholars included Molina as one of the fifteen choices offered to readers.

Holding fast

In spite of her success, Molina—now serving a third four-year term as a supervisor—has no plans to run for federal office. At one point she expressed interest in running for Congress, but she says her dream now is to be the first Hispanic mayor of Los Angeles. However, she did not enter the city's 2001 mayoral primary, an election that featured two Hispanic male candidates. "I would love to run for mayor," she says, "but I could never be elected." She adds, sounding somewhat defeated, "I may have reached my peak politically."

With ambitions to higher office out of the picture (for now), Molina is free to reflect on the progress that all Latinos have made in this country—due in no small part to her own involvement. On that issue she remains steadfastly upbeat. "I am proud of the gains of Latinos and Latinas," she says with emotion. "We have made tremendous accomplishments in a very short time."

She adds, referring to the Latina movement, of which she has been such an important leader, "No one can tell us we can't do it anymore. No one can tell a woman she can't run for office. We have patted down the grass for a lot of people."

Although Molina and her husband, Ron Martinez, have a thirteen-year-old daughter, Valentina, she is less sanguine about the prospects for the next generation. "I am happy that my daughter will face less discrimination," she says happily, "but we are barely beginning to do the kind of work that is necessary for our children."

She is concerned over the lack of involvement and interest in civil rights causes by Latino youth. She is disappointed that there is "not as much activism in young people," and she decries the lack of skepticism. She poses the question: "If you don't challenge, what are you contributing?" She states blankly, "We are not cultivating the new Cesar Chavezes of the world," in reference to the lack of young leaders in the civil rights movement.

Of course, there will never be another Cesar Chavez, but as the residents of Los Angeles County will tell you, there is also only one Gloria Molina.

Rick Laezman is a freelance writer in Los Angeles. He writes for print and online publications on a variety of topics.